DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 296 293 CS 009 202

AUTHOR Swanson, Charlene C.
TITLE Reading and Writing Readers' Theatre Scripts. Reading Around Series No. 1.
INSTITUTION Australian Reading Association, Adelaide.
REPORT NO ISBN-0-949512-20-6
PUB DATE Mar 88
NOTE 5p.
AVAILABLE FROM Australian Reading Association, PO Box 78, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia ($1.00 per copy plus $0.50 handling fee, Australian dollars).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Creative Dramatics; Elementary Education; Foreign Countries; Literature Appreciation; *Oral Interpretation; *Playwriting; *Readers Theater; *Reading Instruction; Reading Writing Relationship; Scripts
IDENTIFIERS Australia; Charlottes Web

ABSTRACT

Intended for elementary school teachers, this short pamphlet describes the processes involved in executing a readers' theater. Much easier to implement than dramatic performances, reader's theater is seen as part theater and part oral interpretation. As outlined in the pamphlet, the procedures for implementing readers' theater in the classroom include (1) finding or writing scripts; (2) introducing and assigning parts; (3) rehearsing; (4) reassigning parts; (5) planning a performance; and (6) finally performing. The pamphlet lists the steps to help involve students in writing scripts as: selecting the story; making a photocopy to mark; labeling character and narrator parts; deleting non-essential information; reading aloud to edit; and typing. The pamphlet concludes that the major benefits of readers' theater are increased oral reading, a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the elements of story such as character and plot development, and exposure to new books. An appendix contains a scene from "Charlotte's Web." (MS)

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Reading Around Series

Australian Reading Association

Series Editor: Dr Fred Gollasch

No.1

March 1988

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READING AND WRITING READERS' THEATRE SCRIPTS

by Charlene C. Swanson

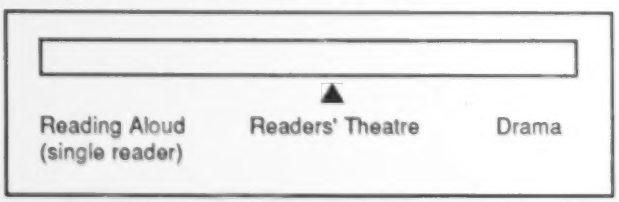
Put a little fun into your classroom and reap the benefits!

The fun is readers' theatre. Readers' theatre is half theatre, half oral interpretation. The script consists of one or more narrator parts to describe actions and background information and the characters' parts. The characters read their lines but rarely perform actions. In lieu of costumes characters may wear identifying hats or labels. The major benefits of readers' theatre are increased oral reading, a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the elements of story such as character and plot development, and exposure to new books.

The easiest way to begin to understand readers' theatre is to observe a performance. Visualize a small group of fifth grade students performing a scene from *Charlotte's Web* (Appendix A). Three students stand in front of the classroom facing their audience, the remaining twenty-five students. Each character wears a hat or sign. Protruding from Charlotte's hat is a gaudy, yellow 25cm pipe-cleaner spider. Wilbur wears a pink hat depicting the head of a pig. The narrator begins reading. The characters read their lines fluently and convincingly from the scripts they hold. The scene ends. The audience applauds.

From this brief glimpse you can see that readers' theatre retains some of the elements of drama while emphasizing the element of oral interpretation.

Figure 1: WHAT IS READERS' THEATRE?



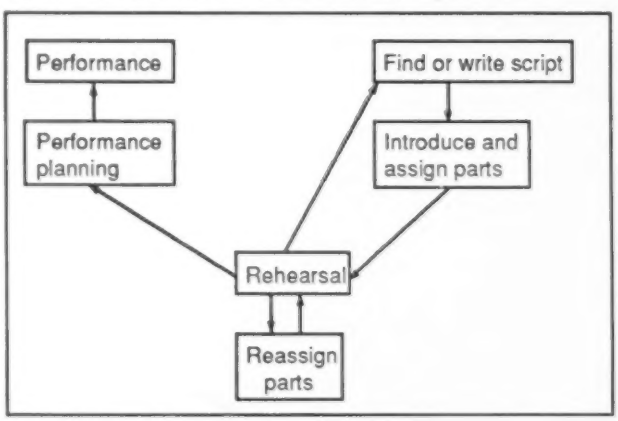
As in drama there is a script. But all the information an audience needs to know is revealed by the various character speaking parts and one or more narrator parts. There are no costumes, stage actions, scenery or memorizing of parts to worry about. While simple hats or signs may be worn, the main emphasis is on fluent oral reading with appropriate voice manipulations to convey meaning.

Both drama and readers' theatre provide students with rich learning opportunities. Yet many primary teachers shy away from involving students in dramatic performances because certain aspects of a dramatic performance appear to be overwhelming obstacles: directing, costuming, blocking, set design, props, makeup and rehearsal time. Even when teachers feel competent to handle these details, the reality of the increased work load involved in producing a play may be enough to reduce their efforts to one performance a year. But readers' theatre is much easier to implement.

PROCEDURES FOR READERS' THEATRE

The first time students are introduced to readers' theatre the procedures should be kept simple. Keep student decision-making to a minimum until students have had several successful experiences with readers' theatre. The major steps for readers' theatre are summarized visually (Figure 2) and elaborated below.

Figure 2: PROCEDURES FOR READERS' THEATRE



1. Find or write scripts

- First, the teacher needs to find or write readers' theatre scripts appropriate for the intended class. A few scripts for classroom use can be found in the books listed under resources. For public performances a wide variety of scripts can be purchased from the Readers' Theatre Script Service. Writing your own readers' theatre scripts and teaching your students to write scripts is the best way to get good scripts for your class. Directions are included in another part of this paper.

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2. Introduce and assign parts

- Introduce readers' theatre to one group at a time if possible. Bring the correct number of students together to participate in a particular script or adapt a script accordingly. (It's easy to add an extra narrator part by alternately numbering the narrator parts for Narrator 1 and Narrator 2.)
- Provide a motivating introduction to the selected script as you would any piece of literature.

3. Rehearse

- The rehearsal is the essence of readers' theatre. Here is where students get practice becoming fluent oral readers. They must understand the story before they can use their voices to convey that interpretation to others. Repeated readings in a readers' theatre setting is not tedious, but fun.
- First, students read the script silently to get the main idea. Younger students can read it aloud with the teacher or listen to an older group of children performing the script. They might follow along with their fingers while they listen.
- Then assign the parts to individual students. Be sure that longer, more difficult parts do not go to the poorer or less confident readers for the first few readings of a script.
- When using a script for the first time, have students find and underline the name of their part each time it appears in the left margin of the script. Then have them write that character's name on the front of the script. As students change parts, they exchange scripts.
- Students then rehearse their parts and ask each other or the teacher for help with unknown words.
- Now read the script aloud. Remind students to say the line the way that the character would say it and to follow the voice directions included by the script writer. Also, remind them to follow along when others are reading so they will be ready to read when their turn arrives.
- After the first reading, discuss the story as a group. Focus on how each character feels in this situation. What are some different ways we can show that kind of feeling in our voice?
- Now have the students do a second oral reading, keeping the same parts.
- Use of a particular script with a particular group of students can end at this point or, as Figure 2 shows, other options are available.

4. Reassign parts

- Some scripts are so enjoyable that students will not be ready to stop. One option is to switch parts. This is a good time for the less able readers to read a larger part.
- This swapping of parts may take place over several days. Stop each day's lesson before students become bored. Time limits will vary with age and script.

5. Planning a performance

- When students are especially fond of a script, they may wish to plan a performance for the rest of the class or for other audiences.
- Let them decide as a group if they wish to make hats or any other costume or props, and if so to design them together.
- Folders can be made for scripts. Sometimes the colour of the folder reflects the character.
- If students will perform in a large hall for an audience, more extensive planning is required. They will have to be sure their voices are loud enough or else figure out how microphones can be used. Make sure lighting is adequate so scripts can be read with ease. Memorized lines are not part of readers' theatre.

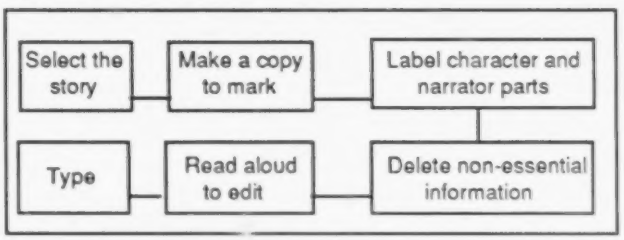
6. The performance

- Students stand in front of the audience holding scripts and wearing the simple hats, signs or costumes decided by the group.
- They read the lines with expression and enjoyment.

WRITING READERS' THEATRE SCRIPTS

Many young children who have read and performed three to four readers' theatre scripts are ready to write their own scripts from favourite books they have read. Most children find the task easier if they work with a partner who has read the same book. Figure 3 provides an overview of the steps to be discussed.

Figure 3: WRITING A SCRIPT



1. Select the story

- Keep two factors in mind when selecting an event from a favourite book to convert into a readers' theatre script. (1) The event must have sufficient interesting dialogue between characters, and (2) the event must be self-contained, that is, knowledge of events before and after this event is not necessary to understand and enjoy the script.

2. Make a photocopy to mark

- Easier than hand-copying all the lines is making a photocopy of the pages to be transformed into the script.

3. Label character and narrator parts

- Most dialogue requires no rewriting for the readers' theatre script. Just write the character's name in the left-hand margin and follow with a colon.
- It is permissable to give a character advice regarding the speaking of a particular line. These voice directions are placed within parentheses and follow the character's name.
  Example 1: Wilbur: (softly) Charlotte?
  Example 2: Mrs Kookaburra: (anxiously) Do you want a nurse for him?
- Descriptive passages are rewritten for narrators to speak to provide necessary information to the audience.
- Most scenes begin with the narrator describing the scene and the characters.
  Example: Narrator 1: The bush was alive with excitement, Mrs Koala had a brand new baby and the news spread like wildfire.

4. Delete non-essential information

- Cross out parts of the descriptive passage which are unnecessary for the understanding of the script. Combine two or three sentences into one if necessary. Too much narrator information will make a script move very slowly.
- Since characters speak their own lines all statements referring to the speaker are omitted. These can be crossed out on the copy.
  Example: 'she said'.

5. Read aloud to edit

- When the script seems finished, the writing pair ask a group of students to read the script aloud while they, the writers, listen and follow the script.
- Sometimes voice directions are added at this time. Narrator parts may be added or deleted to help clarify meaning.

6. Type

- Either type, enter onto a computer disk or neatly hand copy the final script.
- Lines must be easy for characters to read.
- I recommend that students and teachers use the word processor whenever possible. Then scripts can be edited easily as more readers indicate that changes should be made.
- If scripts are to be placed in a folder, be sure to keep a wide left margin so that binding doesn't make the script difficult to read.

BENEFITS OF READERS' THEATRE

Readers' theatre is an extremely useful instructional activity. The benefits centre around the amount of time students can be engaged actively in meaningful oral reading and purposeful listening. This is in sharp contrast to the non-meaningful oral reading and absence of listening which has dominated circle or round-robin reading. In readers' theatre students are motivated to read a script three or four times, thereby achieving a level of fluent reading so important to reinforcing a positive self-esteem. If they decide to exchange parts, they may read the script even more times. What is more important is the ease with which students of all ability levels can work within the same group. In light of the many research studies which have confirmed the negative effects of ability grouping for the poorest readers, this may be the greatest of the many benefits of readers' theatre.

In rural and outback schools many teachers find the mixed ability feature of readers' theatre attractive for a different reason. Readers' theatre is an activity that can involve students at a variety of age and ability levels. Older students can serve as models of fluent reading, directors, script writers, and artistic consultants. While the older students lead the readers' theatre session, the teacher has time to tutor other students individually. All students in this situation are able to benefit. Having older students write and record scripts on tape for younger students to listen to prior to rehearsal is a feature that all teachers can enjoy in or out of the one teacher school.

The final but possibly the greatest benefit of readers' theatre is the promotion of recreational reading. A well-selected five minute readers' theatre script can convince students to read the book from which it came. They have been introduced to characters and the author's style of writing. This pleasant introduction gets reluctant readers past the most difficult part of reading – finding a book they can read and enjoy. When teachers begin to share the scripts they and their students have written, hundreds of scripts could be in circulation within a single school district. What a great way to increase recreational reading.

If you feel you need a few more benefits to convince principals and parents that readers' theatre is worth the time spent, I leave you with this list.

- Provides a satisfying context for meaningful oral reading.
- Establishes comprehension as a necessary condition of reading, not a result of reading.
- Supports student decision-making and ownership of reading and writing.
- Demonstrates the effective use of voice to communicate interpretation of text.
- Demonstrates the effectiveness of a process-oriented curriculum rather than a product-oriented curriculum.
- Fosters understanding and critical analysis of the elements and structure of story, genre, and literary conventions from the perspective of both reader and writer.
- It's fun.

RESOURCES FOR READERS' THEATRE

Coger, L.I. & White, R. (1973) *Readers' Theatre Handbook.* Glenview, Illinois: Scott Foresman.

Readers' Theatre News, P.O. Box 15847, San Diego, CA 92115, U.S.A.

Readers' Theatre Script Service, P.O. Box 178333, San Diego, CA 92117.

Robertson, M.E. & Poston-Anderson, B. (1986). *Readers' Theatre: A Practical Guide.* Sydney: Hodder & Stoughton.

REFERENCE

White, E.B. *Charlotte's Web.* (1963). Harmondsworth, England: Puffin.

APPENDIX A

CHARLOTTE'S WEB
CHAPTER 9

Page 64 (Paragraph 2)

Narrator: Wilbur hung his head. His eyes grew wet with tears. Charlotte noticed his embarrassment and she spoke sharply to the lamb.

Charlotte: Let Wilbur alone! He has a perfect right to smell, considering his surroundings. You're no bundle of sweet peas yourself. Furthermore, you are interrupting a very pleasant conversation. What were we talking about, Wilbur, when we were so rudely interrupted?

Wilbur: Oh, I don't remember. It doesn't make any difference. Let's not talk anymore for a while, Charlotte. I'm getting sleepy. You go ahead and finish fixing your web and I'll just lie here and watch you. It's a lovely evening. (Sigh.)

Narrator: Twilight settled over Zuckerman's barn, and a feeling of peace. Fern knew it was almost suppertime but she couldn't bear to leave. Wilbur lay, but he remembered what the old sheep had told him.

The thought of death came to him and he began to tremble with fear.

Wilbur: (Softly) Charlotte?

Charlotte: Yes, Wilbur?

Wilbur: I don't want to die.

Charlotte: Of course you don't.

Wilbur: I just love it here in the barn. I love everything about this place.

Charlotte: Of course you do. We all do.

Wilbur: Charlotte?

Charlotte: Yes?

Wilbur: Were you serious when you promised you would keep them from killing me?

Charlotte: I was never more serious in my life. I am not going to let you die Wilbur.

Wilbur: How are you going to save me?

Charlotte: Well, I don't really know. But I'm working on a plan.

Wilbur: That's wonderful. How is the plan coming Charlotte? Have you got very far with it? Is it coming along pretty well?

Charlotte: Oh, it's coming all right. The plan is still in its early stages and hasn't completely shaped up yet, but I'm working on it.

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Wilbur: When do you work on it?

Charlotte: When I'm hanging head-down at the top of my web. That's when I do my thinking, because then all the blood is in my head.

Wilbur: I'd be only too glad to help in anyway I can.

Charlotte: Oh, I'll work it out alone. I can think better if I think alone.

Wilbur: All right. But don't fail to let me know if there's anything I can do to help, no matter how slight.

Charlotte: Well, you must try to build yourself up. I want you to get plenty of sleep, and stop worrying. Never hurry and never worry! Chew your food thoroughly and eat every bit of it, except you must leave just enough for Templeton. Gain weight and stay well – that's the way you can help. Keep fit and don't lose your nerve. Do you think you understand?

Wilbur: Yes, I understand.

Charlotte: Go along to bed then. Sleep is important.

Narrator: Wilbur trotted over to the darkest corner of his pen and threw himself down. He closed his eyes. In another minute he spoke.

Wilbur: Charlotte?

Charlotte: Yes, Wilbur?

Wilbur: May I go to my trough and see if I left any of my supper? I think I left a tiny bit of mashed potato.

Charlotte: Very well. But I want you in bed again without delay.

Narrator: Wilbur started to race out to his yard.

Charlotte: Slowly, slowly!! Never hurry and never worry!

Narrator: Wilbur checked himself and crept slowly to his trough. He found a bit of potato, chewed it carefully, swallowed it, and walked back to bed. He closed his eyes and was silent for a while.

Wilbur: (Whisper) Charlotte?

Charlotte: Yes?

Wilbur: May I get a drink of milk? I think there are a few drops of milk left in my trough.

Charlotte: No, the trough is dry, and I want you to go to sleep. No more talking! Close your eyes and go to sleep!

Narrator: Wilbur shut his eyes. Fern got up from her stool and started for home, her mind full of everything she had seen and heard.

Wilbur: Goodnight, Charlotte!

Charlotte: Goodnight, Wilbur.

Wilbur: Goodnight.

Charlotte: Goodnight.

Adapted by: Kim Wheeler

About the author...

Dr Charlene Swanson from Southern Utah State College was visiting lecturer in Language Arts at Armidale CAE in 1987. She has a strong interest in reading and reading education, and she contributed to the Diploma in Teaching program.

While in Australia she developed a strong interest in Australian children's literature and is now researching a comparative study of Australian and US children's literature.

The views expressed in this pamphlet are the views of the author. They do not necessarily represent the view of the editor or the Australian Reading Association.

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ISBN 0 949512 20 6. Reading Around Series
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